2: O'Shea G-3 (1946-1948) 1947 MK4 Trucial Oman MK4

transport; there is no flat desert, as at Sharjah, suitable for an air-field, and the mountain ranges are too close for safe flying.

In parenthesis, I learnt that shortly after the Sheikh of Sharjah had agreed to lease his land to the British for the purposes of an airfield, he was secretly murdered by a hired assassin, who crept into his palace while he slept, put his eyes out with a red-hot iron, and slit his throat. The present ruler of Sharjah, Sultan bin Saqr, never sleeps without an armed bodyguard outside his room, and it is whispered that he is waiting to avenge the murder of his father. He has little doubt who instigated the crime.

An old retainer of the Khan Sahib's, a wrinkled Arab with a henna-dyed beard, Ali bin Achmed, came to talk to us. He is employed as a seaman and looks after the petrol dhow on which the emergency stocks provided by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company are stored. He is a distinguished-looking old man, with a fund of stories which he related to us as the sun sank slowly behind the sandhills and the palm trees leant in ragged silhouette against the sapphire-tinted horizon.

The Khan Sahib closed the shutters, lighted a perfumed coil of anti-mosquito powder, and hung a kerosene lamp from a hook in the ceiling. A slave brought us dishes of rice, steamed lamb, curry balls, chipatties, *haloua*, fruit and turkish delight, and, feeling ravenous, we ate in silence, seated on Persian rugs with our legs tucked underneath us in Arab style.

After the third cup of clove-scented coffee, we sat in the dim light, smoking cigarettes, while Ali bin Achmed puffed away at his tiny pipeful of hashish. He told us wild stories of shipwrecks on the rocks, and of pirates who plundered the unfortunate vessels and held the passengers to ransom; of British gunboats which shelled the village in reprisal and clapped the headmen in gaol. Then he spoke of the wild men of the mountains, the Shi'hou tribe, who seldom left their dark caves in the hills, and who lived on fish, wild honey and dates. They never mixed with the lowland Arabs, were greatly feared on account of their wild appearance and cruel habits, and were believed to be in league with a djinn.

'There is gold and tin in the mountains,' said Ali, 'but men will not seek for it on account of these wild ones. A man would be rich who dared to climb those cruel slopes and search for the gleaming metal. But, praise be to Allah, it would be a foolhardy enterprise.'

The Shi'hou tribe is a very ancient one, according to Ali, and

186 inhabited the mountain caves long before the present Arabs, who
563 are mostly farmers and fishermen, came to live in the valleys and date plantations. It is said by some (he added) that they are descendants of Sinbad, the sailor hero of the *Arabian Nights*, who was born at Zubair, near Basra, where the Euphrates joins forces with the Shatt-al-Arab river. In these mountains the fabulous Giant Roc, *rukh* in Arabic, is said to have had a lair from which he would carry gold and precious stones, as well as pearls, to his island fortress near Aden.

'It was probably nothing more than a *na'qr* (eagle),' broke in the Khan Sahib with a chuckle, but Ali would have none of this.

'No, Sahib, it was a giant bird with a spread of wings that shadowed the land for miles and struck fear into the hearts of men,' he said, uttering a '*Bismillah*' to protect himself from evil.

'Tush!' said the Khan Sahib. 'Then it was a *na'sir* (vulture)', and Ali, thus affronted, fell into a sulky silence and puffed away at his pipe, and we did not hear more of his stories that night.

352 The Khan Sahib began to yawn sleepily and presently asked us if
354 we were ready to retire. He conducted us along a white-walled
357 gallery to our sleeping quarters, a low-ceilinged room containing half a dozen charpoys and a brazier of smouldering charcoal. Feeling drowsy, we undressed quickly and were soon half asleep. Outside the veranda a watchman chanted songs of praise to Allah; a pai dog bayed at the moon, and the fronded leaves of the palms whispered secrets to the night.

2: O'Shea G-3 (1944-1945) 1947 MK4 Trucial Oman MK4

we all were sensible that behind the smiling mask lay a mind as keen and poised as the blade of his ceremonial sword.

When we left the palace, the sun was blazing from a cloudless sky and the creek shone like a mirror. We returned to the Khan Sahib's house to pack some refreshments, and then mounted the six camels which he had procured for us and began the eight-mile ride to his summer residence at the foot of the mountains. Although a comparatively short distance, the journey was a tiring one. Apart from a few scattered palm trees, there was no shade, and the sun, being in the meridian, was at its fiercest and beat down upon us mercilessly. The humidity was extremely trying, also: Frew thought it must have been about 80°. The perspiration streamed off our faces and seeped through our shirts. Our camels, also affected by the heat, lumbered along in leisurely fashion, which was not so uncomfortable as when they cantered. We passed several large date plantations, as shady and inviting as an English wood, and noisy with the cries of jays and parakeets. Brilliant-hued butterflies darted among the palm fronds, some of them measuring six inches across the wings.

Crossing a dried-up water course, or *wadhi*, we reached the foot of the hills. Of buff and pink sandstone, they sloped gradually for 300 feet, and were easily climbable for that distance. At that point they gave way to sheer cliffs of black and brown igneous rock, formidable with giant buttresses and massive boulders. Occasionally we glimpsed passes and crevices along the slopes which were honeycombed with caves. In these, the Khan Sahib informed us, the Shi'hou tribes lived. About 2,000 feet up, there were plateaux in the mountains, with small valleys where the tribesmen cultivated corn and sugar canes. We saw nothing of the Shi'hou, however, and after an hour's ride entered a low-lying valley through an avenue of tall neam trees.

There were about twenty houses on this summer estate. Each was a two-storied coral and plaster dwelling, with an open veranda running round the top floor. A low mud wall and a wicket gate divided the properties, each of which had its guard of sleepy-looking Arabs armed with rifles. We dismounted in front of the gateway, leaving our camels in charge of the guard. In contrast to the surrounding desert, the garden was like an illustration from the *Arabian Nights' Entertainment*. White and crimson roses flourished in pots on either side of the path, whilst masses of red and purple bougainvillea trailed over the veranda. There was even a small

[Dear Ras-al-Khaimah -- August]

the surrounding country, and Stanton took several photographs. 000
A large brown eagle hovered curiously above us as we stood there, circling high above the peaks, and it appeared that its eyrie was in some near-by chimney. The crevice widened above us and was floored with loose stones and boulders, suggesting that at one time a mountain stream had flowed through here on its way to the foothills from some watershed. There were even a few clumps of grass and small mountain flowers, sustained by water which dripped from the roof of a cave above. While I was gazing at the view, Stanton disappeared. Annoyed at the delay which this would entail, for we should by now have begun our return journey to the Khan Sahib's house, I shouted for him to turn back. There was no reply, however, so I began to follow him up the crevice.

After a climb of five minutes, I found Stanton awaiting me at the top of the crevice. He was very excited and pointed ahead of him. Raising myself on the ledge, I looked down on a surprising sight. Below us, hemmed in by high peaks, was a plateau or bowl-shaped valley in which cattle were grazing in the long grass. The sight was so lovely and so unexpected that I could not suppress a cry of admiration. A little stream, crystal clear, meandered through the valley, issuing as a miniature waterfall from the rocks. Along its banks grew dwarf camel thorns, acacias and clumps of mountain daisies. There were no human beings in sight, but near the cliff edge we noticed a hut-like habitation in front of which rose the blue smoke of a wood fire. 563 609

'This must be one of the *Shi'hou* encampments,' Stanton whispered eagerly. 'I'd give anything for a photograph of one of the blighters. Do you realize that very few white men have ever seen them?'

I shrugged impatiently and pointed out that it was nearly three o'clock already. We had promised the Khan Sahib that we should be ready to leave for Mahrid at three and pick up our cars. There was no controlling Stanton's eagerness, however. He was a much younger man than I, he had never been East before, and he was determined to take as many photographs of Arabs as his film ration would allow. Before I could restrain him he had scrambled down into the valley and was making towards the hut. I reached him just as he was focusing his lens. At that moment the figure of a woman, unveiled and clad in filthy rags, rushed shrieking out of the hut and made towards a cave in the hillside.

1 [In the hills near Ras-al-Khaimah --Analyst

[Shi'hou]

563 609 The situation was getting a little out of hand. I seized Stanton by the arm and urged him back towards the crevice up which we had come. Hardly had we reached the end of the valley when a dozen emaciated Arabs, with long beards, and rifles in their hands, suddenly appeared from behind a row of neam trees. They were slowly moving towards the entrance to the crevice, from which they must have watched us emerge, intent on cutting off our retreat. Before we could draw our revolvers one of them had fired his rifle, the bullet striking the rock cliff behind us.

Stanton yelled and dashed towards a hole in the rocks. We ran like hares to the cave, bullets spattering the rocks all round us, and reached the entrance just in time. We held a brief council of war and decided that, with a dozen rounds each, we could just about hold our own, since the cave was a natural fort and was better suited for defence than for attack. To our consternation the twelve *Shi'hou* were soon joined by about twenty more armed men who began to creep towards our hiding place. We realized that it was useless to try and shoot our way out, and replacing our 142 revolvers in their holsters, awaited the outcome. The *Shi'hou*, who by now stood outside the cave yelling and gesticulating with their rifles, were an extraordinary-looking lot. Shorter than the average Arab, they had a much wilder look, with long hair and beards. [411] Each man carried a curious little axe, no bigger than a hammer, attached to a long pole. Their faces were rounder and much less Semitic than the Arabs', and of a reddish-brown colour. A few strips of cotton saved them from complete nudity, and their arms and legs were covered with silver rings.

563 609 The only member of the tribe who wore a head-dress—a strip of dirty white cloth worn in the manner of a turban—stepped forward and spoke to us in the strange dialect of his tribe. I knew some Arabic and recognized one word which, roughly translated, meant 'Come out'. As we left the cave and stood before him they yelled more wildly than before, no doubt demanding our blood as the price of violating the sanctity of their hills. The headman silenced them and began to jabber at us violently, gesticulating fiercely with his hands. After five minutes of this haranguing, he seemed to realize that we did not understand him and glared at us impatiently.

486 563 'What about the *ghuli chit*?' Stanton whispered in my ear, and I suddenly remembered the pass which the Sheikh of Sharjah had provided me with. This was a piece of paper, he[illegible]d with the

[Shi 'hou]

sheikh's name and address in Arabic, and a statement in the same language to the effect that the bearer had his permission to travel through Oman without let or hindrance. It also offered dire penalties, including the amputation of the right hand, to any who dared to show violence to the bearer. Unfolding this rather dirty piece of paper I handed it to the headman. He held it gingerly in his fingers, gazing at it suspiciously, and pretended to read it although it was upside down. With a shrug he then handed it to another tribesman, but this man could make nothing of the document either.

Although they could not understand Arabic script, I think they must have had some inkling of its meaning, for they began a violent altercation amongst themselves. One of them suddenly pointed in the direction of Ras-al-Khaimah, and then at us. Beginning to get rather tired of all this pantomime, I decided to take decisive measures. There is a rule in the desert, at least among the Bedouins, that if you are attacked you should seize the garment of the most respectable Arab and cry: '*Daheel*', which means 'protection'. Under the unwritten laws of Arab hospitality, he is obliged to keep you in safe custody for at least twenty-four hours. The principle is not unlike that obtaining in the Middle Ages, when the outlaw could enter a church and claim sanctuary from the clergy.

I had no idea how it would work with the *Shi'hou*, but I was determined to try. Dashing forward I seized the scanty hem of the headman's *kufiyeh* and yelled '*Daheel*' at the top of my voice. To my surprise the old man's face was suddenly contorted with fear, and he stepped back as though I had struck him a blow. His rapid action resulted in a piece of the rotten cloth coming away in my hands and he was left almost naked. The effect of his predicament on the other *Shi'hou* was astonishing. At first amazement, then amusement, was written on their faces. Some grinned widely, others burst into shrieks of laughter. Even the headman, who had covered up his bare limbs as best he could with a few shreds of cloth, was grinning sheepishly. All signs of hostility had vanished. With a gesture the headman beckoned us towards the hut from which the shrieking woman had emerged.

Closely followed by a still laughing bodyguard, we marched towards the hut. The headman entered first, directing us to follow him. It was dark and dirty inside as well as hot and foul-smelling. Our hosts squatted on the bare floor in a circle, which we joined.